

Report

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

■ 1.0 Site Description

The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve was created as a public/private partnership in November 1996 to protect a nationally significant example of the tallgrass ecosystem. It also strives to interpret the cultural resources of the preserve and the heritage associated with the ranch property on the site. The preserve contains approximately 11,000 acres located in the Flint Hills region of Kansas (see Figure 1). The National Park Trust purchased the land in 1994, and retains ownership of most of it. However, The Trust will donate up to 180 acres to the NPS to facilitate management, interpretation, and operation of the preserve. The preserve is located adjacent to U.S. Highway 50 and is bisected by Kansas Highway 177 near Strong City, Kansas. Highway 177 is designated as the Flint Hills Scenic Byway under the Kansas Scenic Byways Program. This roadway currently provides access to the preserve.

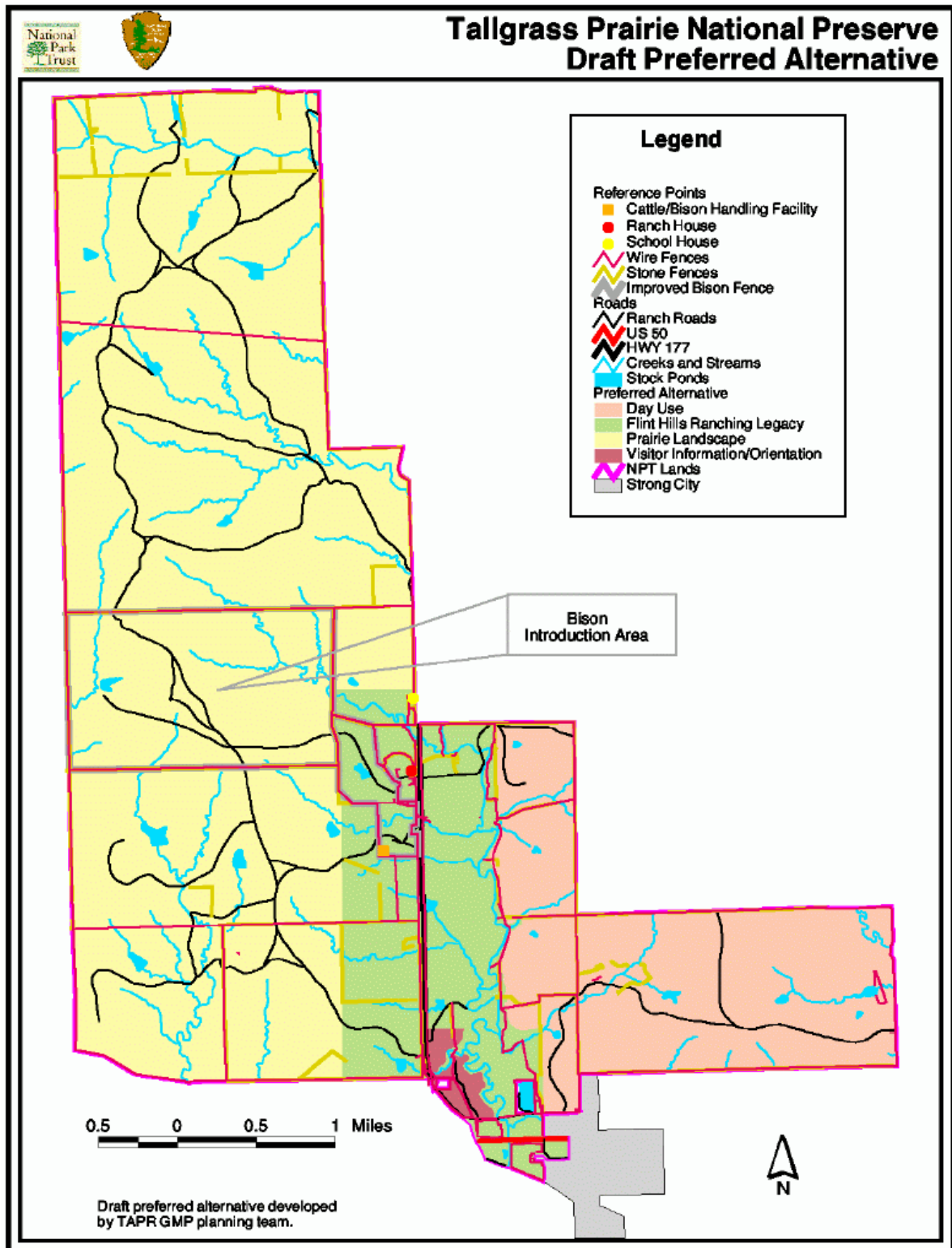
The primary existing visitor activity areas in the preserve include the buildings of the former Z-Bar/Spring Hill ranch (being used as headquarters on a temporary basis until a new Visitor Center is constructed), the Fox Creek School (a late 19th century one-room school house), a nature trail, and acres of prairie lands. The preserve is so young it does not yet offer great diversity of visitor activities, but expansion of activities are planned. A seven-mile, one-hour and 45-minute prairie tour, called the Tallgrass Tour, conducted by the preserve staff using a small bus traveling on existing unpaved ranch roads is currently offered. The Tallgrass Tour is offered three times a day, six days a week, from April 10 to October 31.

Other options include a self-guided tours of the ranch headquarters area; walking trails tours to an overlook behind the headquarters or on the 1.75-mile-long Southwind Nature Trail; weekend house tours of the limestone ranch house; group tours of the ranch headquarters area; and Treasures of the Tallgrass Tour. Visitors park in a gravel lot in the ranch headquarters area and in designated areas near the school.

Last year the preserve received 19,000 visitors; this year 20,000 to 21,000 visitors are expected. Most visitors stay no more than an hour, unless they take one of the guided tours which typically extends their visit to two and three-quarters hours. Peak visitation months for the preserve are between April and mid-June, and from late August through October. Weekends are the peak visitation days.

Upon the construction of a new Visitor Center, visitors will be able to drive to the Visitor Center (which will probably be located at the southern edge of the preserve) and then take a shuttle bus to the Ranch area. Visitors currently are able to drive to the Ranch Headquarters area a park in an adjacent lot.

Figure 1. Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve



A General Management Plan (GMP) has been drafted and should be completed next spring. One of the recommendations contained in the draft plan regarding transportation is for transportation routes and access to be directed away from any sacred American Indian sites. Another recommendation calls for infrastructure development to be kept to a minimum in order to protect natural resources and cultural landscapes and to maintain views. The draft plan calls for controlled visitor access and movement to ensure resource protection while accommodating high-density use. The plan further recommends using existing roads and road beds and a public transportation system, such as a shuttle, to provide transportation to various points within the preserve, tours, and access to the prairie.

If the GMP is implemented, visitors would need to take a shuttle bus to the Ranch Headquarters Area from a proposed Visitor Information and Orientation Area at State Route 177 and U.S. 50, rather than driving to it. Costs associated with transportation-related actions described in the GMP are discussed in Section 4.0 of this report.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

The preserve currently provides a seven-mile roundtrip guided bus tour (the Treasures of the Tallgrass Tour) from the Visitor Center out into the prairie. The tour is managed through a partnership between the NPS and the National Park Trust. The Trust purchased two buses for touring: one 22-passenger gas bus and one 23-passenger diesel bus.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

- If the GMP is implemented, visitors would need to take a shuttle bus to the Ranch Headquarters Area, rather than driving to it as they do now. Parking would be available at a proposed new Visitor Center.
- Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) might not only go north to the preserve from a potential new Visitor Center, but could also go south into two neighboring communities, Cottonwood Falls and Strong City. These small communities could experience economic benefits from visitor access to the communities.
- ATS could provide increased access to the prairie and its vistas for special needs visitors who are unable to walk the existing 1.75-mile trail.
- A recent Transportation Analysis for Proposed Action conducted by BRW, Inc. indicated that if a shuttle vehicle was used to transport visitors to the ranch headquarters, parking would be located in a remote location (possible at the new Visitor Center near Strong City which is about 2.4 miles from the ranch headquarters area). According to this study, if a shuttle vehicle with a capacity of 25 passengers is used, a maximum of six shuttle trips would need to be made per hour to accommodate the arriving and departing visitors. The study indicates a fleet of three shuttle vehicles, plus one spare

would be required for operation between Strong City, the Ranch Headquarters, and a nearby school. The annual costs for this shuttle, assuming daily operation during May, June, July, and August, and weekend operation during March, April, September and October, is approximately \$170,000. If the shuttle were extended to serve Cottonwood Falls, five buses, plus one spare, would be needed, with an annual cost of \$320,000.

- Costs described in the Preferred Alternative of the GMP are as follows:
 - Improve roadbed between development area and ranch headquarters areas for shuttle service. Estimate five-mile stretch @ \$500,000 and three precast, two-lane concrete bridges @ \$210,000
 - Cost: \$710,000
 - Improve interior road surfaces for shuttle bus (based on minimal development of five miles, one lane, @ \$65,000 per mile for reconditioning existing roads)
 - Cost: \$325,000
 - Storage/Shuttle Building (Estimate 3,000 square feet @ \$125 per square foot)
 - Cost: \$375,000
 - Parking 150 cars @ \$2,000 per car and 10 buses @ \$10,000 per bus
 - Cost: \$400,000
 - Buses/shuttles (alternative fuel) (two vans @ \$50,000 each; three @ \$100,000 each for three small transit buses)
 - Cost: \$400,000

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

- Provisions of the GMP call for the use of ATS to protect vistas and landscapes.
- ATS could improve access to the prairie and improve visitor experience for special needs visitors and those unable to walk the existing trail.
- ATS needs are documented in the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve – Transportation Analysis for Proposed Action report prepared by BRW, Inc. dated September 30, 1999.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

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